

A Country, At Large

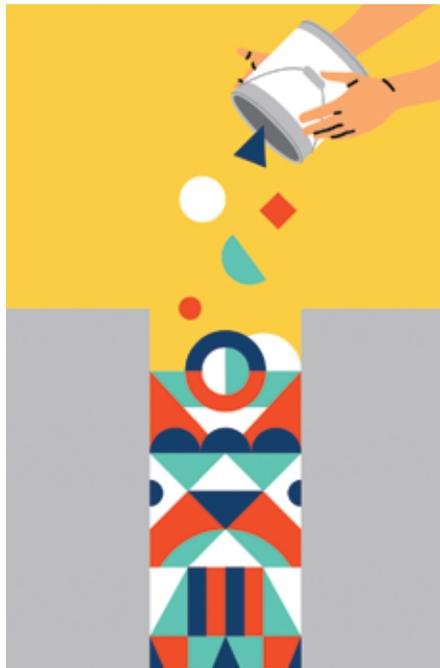
BY HEMAN CHONG

The art and cultural scene in Singapore has changed a lot since I started making art in 1997. I don't think anyone can deny the fact that Singapore's government is one of the very few in Southeast Asia that has progressively encouraged the local growth of art, architecture, culture and design over the past 25 years. Looking back, my entire journey as an artist has been heavily assisted by cultural policies, which have produced the institutions that have served as cornerstones in the evolution of my practice.

For example, since 1999, Singapore's National Arts Council (NAC) has supplied me with grants to participate in art fairs, biennials, conferences, exhibitions and residencies abroad, enabling me to build a network that allows me access to even more of these art events and festivals. The Substation, an independent art space founded in 1990 by the late theater doyen Kuo Pao Kun, was the first building funded by the NAC's Arts Housing Scheme and was also the first place where I showed my work. There, I tested out many of the ideas behind my subsequent exhibitions. The NAC is also commissioner of the Singapore Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, where I was invited to represent my country at the 50th edition in 2003. The list goes on.

As I was writing this, a new post appeared on my Facebook page. It was written by Tay Kheng Soon, a visionary architect and thinker who has since the late 1950s been extremely vocal and active in introducing his own voice and that of his peers into the Singaporean discourse. He said, "What is the universal message of Singapore? As a 'poison shrimp,' it can only inspire dread. As a successful authoritarian social engineer, it gives encouragement to visionary bureaucrats. What will inspire an inspiring vision of the world in which Singapore can be a catalyst, and in the process transform itself from its servant mentality?"

These thoughts got me thinking about the role I can play as an artist who lives



and works in Singapore. Granted, I have always been a bit of a hermit in Singapore, preferring to work behind the scenes and rejecting a public front. But I think it's important to note that even with my years outside of Singapore—I have spent two years in London, five in Berlin and then two in New York—I don't think I have ever left Singapore. I have never said "no" to taking part in local group exhibitions, regardless of how provincial the exhibitions' premises might be. I have actively produced solo exhibitions, and, in conjunction with them, have given talks to the public. Collaboratively with the National University of Singapore Museum (NUS Museum) and the NAC, I have worked for the past eight years with Ahmad Mashadi at establishing an informal school for curators: the "Curating Lab."

I have always argued that every piece of art produced is embodied in a larger political reality, and that much of what we do as artists in Singapore is linked to our country's own political realities. As such, all art is political, no matter how much we want to distance ourselves from it. How then can I, as an artist, influence these sets of political realities? I am not interested in being a politician, but in many ways there are more possibilities in Singapore for an artist to work politically than for an actual politician.

What, then, might these possibilities be? I feel strongly that the answers might lie in the resources that we have in Singapore: namely, an incredibly strong economy that allows for a large budget surplus every year, which, in turn, is channeled in part to art and cultural activities and institutions. As an artist, I have access to these funds, and it is relatively easy for me to come up with art projects that do not involve any form of object-making. I can use this money to organize workshops or informal residencies, all under the guise of an art project. This, of course, is nothing new and I'm not the first to think of this. But what if the idea of an "art school" isn't exactly a school? What if this school becomes something that has no apparent start or end, or is woven into the very fabric of the everyday? A place where artists can come together and teach each other something—and for free!

As a start, perhaps, one of the things to do as a Singaporean artist is to begin to fuel one's own political imagination and, in turn, to persuade others to imagine along with you—not as a way of generating power or gaining access into politics, but really, to activate imaginations in terms of thinking about how Singapore can become a great place for artists, critics, curators, thinkers and writers to gather, to discuss, to make, to improvise thinking in different ways and to develop alternatives in making things.

In the NUS Museum, there is a small room on the ground floor. On the glass door, you can find a quote by Mashadi: "Things that may or may not happen." Uncertainty is something that Singapore is never good at. Singaporeans are often risk averse. Now is the time to take a step forward and embrace risk and uncertainty. Without these, we will never be able to make any important discoveries about art, ourselves or the world at large.

ILLUSTRATION BY ELLA ZHENG

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